

November 16, 2007

Gila River gives OK to I-10 widening study

By Adam Gaub
Maricopa Tribune

The offer, said Gila River spokeswoman Alia Maisonet, is intended to help both Gila River and the surrounding communities improve their commute as population growth in the area continues.

"Public safety is a huge issue on that stretch," Maisonet said of I-10, which narrows to two lanes heading eastbound just before the Queen Creek/State Route 347 exit. "Public safety officials don't even have room to pull off to the side of the road."

Maisonet said in addition to allowing more right of way to be used to widen the freeway, the community would like to have frontage roads – which she says should have been built decades ago – added to any widening project.

ADOT has yet to make any determination as to the final scope of the project, having just begun the study on I-10 in the northern portion of Pinal County and the extreme southern end of Maricopa County. Gila River, however, continues to have its Transportation Technical Team (TTT) work with ADOT, making recommendations for added interchanges along I-10 through the reservation and improved bridges over washes.

Maisonet said the TTT was specifically looking at Seed Farm Road for a new interchange – a road that leads directly to the community's hospital and government facilities and is roughly aligned with Smith-Enke Road in Maricopa. An overpass is already in place for that road crossing I-10. Maisonet said the community is well aware of how their own citizens and Maricopa residents can be trapped by current road options.

"If there is an accident on Maricopa Road (SR 347), there is no alternative to get down there (to Maricopa), so we're looking at that," she said. "We are impacted no matter what because of our positioning. We want to make sure we improve all traffic flow on the reservation."

In addition to the TTT working with ADOT and studying its own road improvements, an economic advisory committee has also been formed to research where along I-10 new development could work best. The decisions on where to improve and build new interchanges could be critical not only to the tribe's economic development, but also to helping solve the transportation woes of its neighbors.

Near the end of 2006, the reservation reached out to surrounding communities to study transportation plans and gain a better understanding of how to integrate the needs of their neighbors with their own. For Maricopa's transportation manager, Brent Billingsley, the focus for Maricopa residents should be hounding state officials about the transportation needs in the area.

"We need to concentrate on getting SR 347 on the radar screen of the ADOT state transportation board," said Billingsley, who recommended citizens call and e-mail ADOT board members, state representatives and even the governor's office to gain the needed attention. "We still need people to put pressure on ADOT. They need to hear


the impacts (traffic) has on people's lives."

Billingsley is involved in a number of regional and state-level studies, including the Hidden Valley Roadway and Framework Study, which he believes could have "fantastic potential."

He said he is still hoping for a meeting that could be opened to the public for that study's members to hear the feedback from the public on the transportation needs of the area's residents.

In September, the Tucson District of the Arizona Department of Transportation announced plans to widen I-10 from the Pima-Pinal County line to Picacho Peak Road by the fall of 2009. The remainder of the widening, which will take I-10 up to three lanes in each direction, will begin some time after July 2009, to widen I-10 to Interstate 8 from Picacho Peak Road.



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